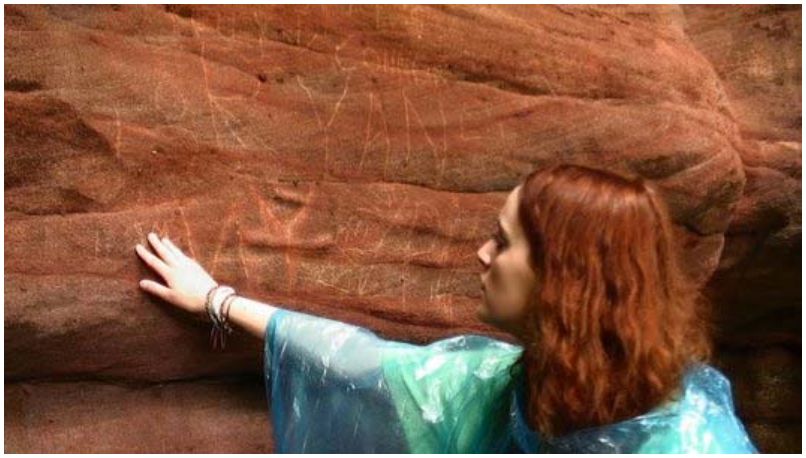
Notes on Contemporary Art and Anthropology Part II: Conjuring the State

NOTES ON CONTEMPORARY ART AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Part 2: Conjuring the State. An essay by Angela McClanahan



Karen Cunningham, 'Fib', 2013, HD video still. Commissioned by LUX & Collective

The state, as we all know, has many incarnations. It is composed of rules and regulations, constitutions and dictats, architectures, geographies, cults of personality and community, often zealots, sometimes despots, amendments, politicians and citizen/subjects. It is at once everywhere and nowhere, public and private, and is simultaneously material and ephemeral. It is particularly spectacular when it draws on the aesthetics of uniformed officialdom and collective experience to produce social affects and thus, political efficacy (sharp navy blue suits, rousing oratory, anthems that crescendo, precisely choreographed military drills), and it consistently employs both subtle and overt modes of surveillance to ensure that its populations constantly regulate their own behaviour according to ascribed social and cultural norms.

Mostly, though, it is incredibly banal.

Almost all of the actions that constitute the essential daily operations of statecraft are, for the most part, mundane and painfully ordinary. Boring, even. From queuing in social security offices, filling in tax forms, to the circulation and arrival of letters demanding council tax payments, governmentality and its attendant practices constantly and rhythmically tick over to produce and reify a form of social organization that seems so habitual as to go, for the most part (and like most other social practices), unreflexively experienced.

This banality and ordinariness is of course precisely one of the ways in which the state stealthily derives its irresistible enchantments and overwhelming power. Indeed, one of the most masterfully honed techniques of biopolitics is that it constantly implicates people in their own subjugation, making it appear ethical, standard, obvious, and above all, natural.

So far, so familiar. It has been well argued over the last three decades across the arts, humanities and social sciences, that the state is a dynamic, malleable, historical, social and cultural construction, that its current and most familiar incarnation is inextricably entangled with the objectives of neoliberal capital, and that it exists primarily as a material, yet 'imaginary' entity [1]. While such arguments have proved to be valuable in exposing the power relations inherent in the practices of statecraft, however, there is a strand of anthropological work around the relationship between magic and the state that can be usefully employed to help us understand such social practices from a different perspective, especially the almost supernatural, trance-like experiences they seem to engender in populations.

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Through using such analyses to critically examine our belief in the state as a rational entity, we can perhaps then called into question the illusion that the 'management' of its populations is geared toward their common interests rather than the objectives of private enclosure.

This essay is the second portion of an earlier article examining relationships between contemporary art and anthropology. This portion of the essay continues in a similar vein, this time exploring how a new video work from Karen Cunningham, an artist whose practice is strongly inflected with and influenced by anthropological perspectives, portrays census taking as a banal element of statecraft. In effectively conveying the affective elements of that banality, I argue that we can read the actions shown in the video as an examination of a curious form of modern magic that conjures the extraordinary illusion of biopolitical practices as mundane, ordinary and natural.

Statecraft as Magic

Over the last 15 years, a number of anthropologists have proposed that modernity, far from operating exclusively in rational, enlightenment terms and scientific frameworks (as the logics and workings of modern nation states are largely assumed to do), has actually produced its own native magical forms and practices. From Michael Taussig's 1997 fictional ethnographic volume *The Magic of the State* [2], to David Graber's recent comparison between magic, politics and art in various academic and popular volumes and journals (as discussed in part one of this essay) [3], magic as a form of widespread contemporary practice in the neoliberal world is increasingly becoming a valid subject of anthropological scrutiny. In the 2003 volume *Magic and Modernity* [4], Peter Pels says that:

'….Modernity [has] generated its own enchantments: the citizens' trances, the pollster's spins, the slave's protections… modern technologies of conduct- both ritual and rational, symbolic and substantial- determine the content and form of modern magic. However, because the content of magic was mostly defined in relation to a past superseded by modernity, magic is a term rarely applied to such modern enchantments.'

Though differing substantially in their theoretical approaches (Pels and Taussig influenced significantly by critical theory and poststructuralism, and Graeber approaching anthropological questions through drawing on a critical realist approach), all more or less propose that the capitalist market is a faith-based system that is reliant, in some ways, on concealed practices of divination and the 'conjuring' of value and capital from what in many cases are, in reality, immaterial voids. At the same time, it is the very *visibility* of those practices—- their obviousness—that makes them appear legitimate and typical. Statecraft often works along similar principles, relying on both faith and skepticism to achieve its aims, its power 'flowing' not from masking, according to Taussig, but rather, in the very *unmasking* of its practices.

Given the increasingly embedded privatisation of state practices over the 20th and 21st centuries, and as the 'affective' spectacle of capital has combined with state power to produce increasingly mutant forms of technological self-subjugation to gird biopolitics even further, examining these practices as a form of *magic* is all the more appropriate. In fact, Arjun Appadurai has recently pointed to sociologist Max Weber's classic study of the relationship between capitalism, religion and the state, focusing on his proclamation that magic's practices are essentially 'coercive proceduralism', which can be compared to the managerial practices that characterise biopolitics [5].

Magic and fetishised facts in Karen Cunningham's *Fib*

Karen Cunningham's 2013 video *Fib* is a deft study of such processes. It examines the ways in which the practices of statecraft often operate as unremarkable, yet highly powerful, modern technologies. The film portrays an act of census taking, a well theorised sphere of biopolitical practice [6] in which pre-determined categories like race, nationality, gender and political persuasion, are set out as objectively existing taxonomies, with 'data' manually gathered from individuals to 'fit' those categories, and thus summon (a term with magical implications purposefully employed here), a population into being. This is very obviously a form of magic, if we define magic in its simplest anthropological terms as acts that are intended to have real social and political effects.

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Fib's young census takers, a woman and man, have both been hired to carry out census work, presumably on temporary contracts, that involves going from door to door in a given village or town, manually taking factual information from the local inhabitants in order to provide 'raw' data for regional or national governing strategies. This process is portrayed as highly banal, indicated by the slow pace of the film, the long periods of still and calm, the characters appearing to be very disinterested in their work; in one scene they meander nonchalantly with the collected data (upon which crucial political decisions are assumed to depend) alongside what appears to be items of food for work break consumption. There are both subtle and overt references to panopticon society, as the camera returns often to gaze on a tree that appears to have an eye on its trunk, a possible representation of the naturalisation of surveillance culture, as well as a nod to song lyrics that refer to power and control. The pair's census work is portrayed as an aside; a tick box exercise that for them may be a means to an end and is certainly less interesting than the exploration and solace taken in the shelter of a local beach cave.

In addition to these elements, the instability of the data is also implied in the film's representation of the survey process. Viewers hear the female character ask census questions, but we don't hear the respondent's answer; an ambivalence is implied, perhaps an implication that the responses are, in reality, ultimately inconsequential, or that in taking and manipulating the responses to obscure (or in some cases, to silence) the voices of people whose views don't 'fit' accepted social norms or categories.

In a similar vein, what if the data is accidentally lost? Or carelessly taken for granted and left behind in the cave? The fallibility of *Fib's* characters is highlighted by the apparent lack of rigour in their census work, yet that very data is presumed to later have a direct impact on their lives, representing the kind of self subjugation described above.

In these and other ways, the statistics gathered in the film, though never visible or discussed, are treated very much as 'factish' objects; hybrid and unstable, possibly inaccurate, yet fetishised and faith-based technologies that possess the ability to transform (or, for us, to 'conjure') the individual *parts* of social and cultural groups (individual persons) into a sacred, somatic *whole* ('the people' and 'the nation'). The film's examination and portrayal of statecraft as banal and ordinary thus contributes to an ongoing discussion in the arts and social sciences of biopolitics as a magical process that is powerful precisely because of its unremarkable qualities, which quietly contribute to the constant summoning of the nation state as a 'social fact'.

And what can be more magical than creating and maintaining belief in an achievement on *that* scale? Perhaps the answer lies in the citizen/subjects of contemporary states conjuring new magical forms that may succeed in transforming such a 'whole' into free and autonomous individual beings.

*A shorter version of this text was published to accompany *Fib's* 2013 showing as part of the Collective Gallery's *Factish Field Project 1* exhibition in Edinburgh.

[1] A number of classic studies from the last thirty years, including Benedict Anderson's 1983 *Imagined Communities* to Michael Herzfeld's 1997 *Cultural Intimacy,* examined the origins and practices of nationalism and the state, making it a well defined strand of study, especially in relation to postcolonialism and identity politics, within postmodernism. Increasingly, scholars interested in nations and nationalism are showing a renewed interest in critiques of capitalism and its embeddedness within nation states to their analyses of statecraft.
[2] Taussig, Michael 1997 *The Magic of the State*. London: Routledge.
[3] See especially Graeber, David 2012 'Can't Stop Believing: Magic and Politics. *The Baffler*, No. 21: pps. 34–37,70-71.
[4] Pels, Peter 2003 'Introduction'. In *Magic and Modernity: Interfaces of Revelation and Concealment*. Stanford University Press.
[5] Appadurai, Arjun 2013 *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition*. London: Verso
[6] See especially Foucault, Michel 2008 *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France 1978-1979.* Palgrave Macmillan, and Ruppert, Evelyn 2008 'I is, therefore I am: The Census as Practice of Double Identification'. *Sociological Research Online*: 13(4)6.